

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

The "Whole Language" Fraud

The professors of reading are at it again. They are in the process of foisting on American primary schools another form of educational malpractice that will guarantee the continued intellectual crippling of American children for years to come. This new form of educational malpractice is called "whole language." But actually there is little new about it. It is the old look-say, sight method of reading instruction (Dick & Jane, et al) dressed up in the new fashions of the '80s.

Its theoreticians and promoters, led by Prof. Kenneth Goodman of Arizona University, have been waging war against intensive, systematic phonics for years. Through unceasing effort and networking they are getting school districts all across America to switch over to "whole language." What this means is that the problems of dyslexia and functional illiteracy will continue to plague America for decades to come.

English as Chinese

What exactly is whole language? Basically it teaches children to read English, not as an alphabetic writing system which it is, but as an ideographic or hieroglyphic system, like Chinese. Children are required to

memorize a sight vocabulary to form the basis of their reading ability. Sight words are, by definition, words children learn to recognize by their configurations without their knowing that the letters stand for anything. As far as the child is concerned, letters are simply a bunch of squiggles with no particular meaning whatever, arranged in some arbitrary manner to make symbols of meaning, like Chinese ideographs.

In other words, in learning a sight vocabulary, children associate the printed word with an idea or "meaning," not language sounds. For example, in a book entitled Evaluation: Whole Language, Whole Child, published by Scholastic in 1988, the authors explain:

"The way you interpret what the child does will reflect what you understand reading to be. For instance, if she reads the word feather for father, a phonics-oriented teacher might be pleased because she's come close to sounding the word out. However, if you believe reading is a meaning-seeking process, you may be concerned that she's overly dependent on phonics at the expense of meaning. You'd be happier with a miscue such as daddy, even though it doesn't look or sound anything like the word in the text. At least the meaning would be intact."

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Reading as a Guessing Game

Another explanation of whole language was given by an article in the Washington Post of November 29, 1986. The article, entitled "Reading Method Lets Pupils Guess," stated:

"The most controversial aspect of whole language is the de-emphasis on accuracy.

"American Reading Council President Julia Palmer, an advocate of the approach, said it is acceptable if a young child reads the word house for home, or substitutes the word pony for horse. 'It's not very serious because she understands the meaning,' said Palmer. 'Accuracy is not the name of the game.'"

Just coincidentally, in 1975 (July 9), Prof. Goodman had told a reporter from the New York Times the very same thing: that if the child saw the word horse and said pony, it was okay. To Prof. Goodman, reading is, in his own words, "a psycholinguistic guessing game."

With such "professors of reading" teaching our teachers, is there any wonder why America has a reading problem?

Phony History

In 1977, Goodman wrote:

"Too often in the past we tried to build technologies without a base in scientific concepts and understanding. We had alchemy before chemistry, astrology before astronomy, witch-doctors before modern medicine. Let's move on now from our reading skill technologies and relegate them to the museum of folklore and superstition in which they belong." (Theory Into Practice, Dec. 1977)

Apparently the professor is ignorant of the fact that ideographs and hieroglyphics preceded the invention of the alphabet. They, not the alphabet,

are in the museum of folklore and superstition. The fact that Goodman can so misrepresent history and get so many American teachers to blindly follow him simply proves how vulnerable teachers are to the false doctrines of their mentors.

In an article in the Reading Teacher of October 1981, Goodman wrote:

"One conclusion which could be drawn from this research [Gleitman & Rosin, RRQ, Summer '73] is that kids could learn without any connections being built between oral English and written English, treating each English written word as if it were an ideograph for the meaning."

Obviously, Prof. Goodman truly believes that children can be taught to read English as if it were Chinese! But if that were true, then America would not have a reading problem. We would not be worrying about growing illiteracy. For most Americans have been taught to read that way since the early 1930s and we know the miserable results of that methodology.

But rather than return to the method that worked for 3,000 years, and still works, intensive phonics, our educators prefer to experiment further with the children, at the children's expense. The Post article tells us:

"[Whole language] was introduced in Washington area schools about three years ago when school systems started training teachers in its techniques. Local educators said it is generally used only as part of an overall program that also teaches critical thinking, writing and phonics."

Phony Phonics

Note that they also teach "phonics." What they don't tell you, however, is that the kind of phonics they teach in a whole language or look-say basal program is not intensive, systematic phonics. What they teach are phonetic clues, such as

initial consonants, to simply help the child to become a better word guesser. Even Egyptian hieroglyphics used phonetic clues to help readers figure out the meaning of the symbols.

The distinction between true phonics and phony phonics is crucial to the understanding of the two different approaches to written English. In true phonics the child is first taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet and then drilled in the letter sounds, usually in consonant-vowel combinations, so that the child develops an automatic association between letters and sounds. When that is accomplished, the child is then given words, sentences, and stories to read.

To master an alphabetic writing system and become a fluent, phonetic reader the child must develop this automatic association between letters and sounds.

Reading for "Meaning"

Phony phonics permits no such mastery. It teaches isolated phonetic clues which the child uses in conjunction with configuration clues, picture clues, and context clues to figure out the "meaning" of a written word. In fact, the teaching method makes sure that the child does not develop the much-needed automatic association between letters and sounds, because in whole-language theory that automatic association is bad.

When a child is conditioned to look at English words as whole configurations, he does not hear the word. He looks at the word as a picture puzzle and tries to figure out what it "means." And once he has trained himself to read that way, he reads inaccurately, substituting words (pony for horse, daddy for father), omitting words, skipping words, reversing letters (because the proper sequence of letters is not terribly important as he searches for "meaning").

He also has real trouble with multisyllabic words not in his speaking vocabulary. He will mutilate words (read salami for Solomon) or truncate words (read phone for telephone).

Developing Dyslexia

In other words, he exhibits the well-known symptoms of dyslexia, that dreaded disability that now afflicts millions of Americans. Isn't it interesting that dyslexia was virtually unheard of before 1930, before the professors of reading embarked on their lunatic course?

Whole-language proponents claim that they teach reading for "meaning." What they actually teach is reading for very limited meaning, for it is impossible to develop an extensive, complex reading vocabulary via that method. It is intensive, systematic phonics which teaches reading for unlimited meaning, for once you've mastered the alphabetic system, everything in the library is at your disposal.

How is it possible that after almost 60 years of failure, such utter nonsense as look-say and whole language can still command the fervent allegiance of so many supposedly intelligent teachers?

Confused Teachers

Part of the answer is in their inability and unwillingness to admit that they've been deceived by their mentors. Also, many of today's primary school teachers were themselves taught to read by look-say and are semi-literate. They haven't the faintest idea what intensive, systematic phonics is.

And "whole language" sounds so good, so progressive, so creative. And what makes it seem new and refreshing is the fact that whole language proponents are highly critical of the major basal reading programs now used in U.S. schools. They criticize them for their

inane stories, dull content, and stultifying workbooks. What they are now saying about the basals is what the proponents of alphabetic phonics have been saying for years.

Also, virtually the entire reading establishment -- the major professional organizations, journals, and graduate schools -- are controlled by the proponents of look-say and whole language. Advocates of intensive, systematic phonics are simply shut out of the system.

IRA Convention

For example, the International Reading Association (IRA), the world's largest professional organization for teachers of reading, is holding its 34th convention this year in New Orleans from April 30 to May 5. Its program lists over 25 workshops with "whole language" in their titles. Many other workshops are about whole language, but not titled as such. We found only one workshop with the word "phonics" in the title: "Reforming the Kindergarten: Replacing Phonics Workbooks with Something Better."

Here are some of the whole language institutes, workshops and symposia scheduled for the convention:

"Computers and Whole Language"

"Whole Language Applications in Word Processing and Databases"

"Whole Language: The Critical Issues"

"Whole Language Classrooms in Action: All Day, Every Day"

"Evaluations in Whole Language Classrooms"

"Whole Language Texas Style"

"Whole Language Approach: Focus on Integrating Black Literature"

"Whole Language Strategies for the Middle Grades"

"When the Principal Asks About the Whole Language Movement"

"Staff Development for Holistic Language Learning: An Implementation Project"

"Integrating Whole Language Philosophy into a Basal-Driven Curriculum"

"Whole Language Plus Whole Curriculum Equal Whole Learning"

"Whole Language Teaching Through Literature and the Arts"

"Designing Whole Language Thematic Units"

"Whole Language, Whole Science, and a Whole Lotta Writin'"

"Teaching the Whole Day the Whole Language Way"

"The Whole Language Perspective on the Reading of Science and Social Studies"

"Whole Language: American and New Zealand Teachers Working Together to Develop Whole Language Classrooms"

"Whole Language Activities: An Integrated Approach to Reading"

"Holistic Strategies for Bilingual Students"

"Whole Language"

"Whole Language Special Interest Group"

"Whole Language in Action: Two Case Studies"

"Whole Language Works in Primary Grades: From Theory to Classroom Implementation"

"Whole Language and Whole Brain"

"Integrating Whole Language into the Head Start Preschool Curriculum"

"'How to' in Whole Language: Putting Theory into Practice"

Children as Guinea Pigs

It's pretty obvious that America's reading teachers have gone bananas over whole language, which merely means that millions of American children will be used as guinea pigs in the educators' new experiment in pedagogy. Note the workshops that refer to whole language as "theory." We doubt that any of the professors of education who are promoting whole language have ever taught a child to read. Those of us in the field who have been teaching children as well as adults to read know that experimentation is not needed. The alphabetic phonics method, which has been in use for about 3,000 years, has an unbeatable track record of success.

But what is the track record of whole language in America? It has none! They say it's been successfully used in New Zealand. But no data about the New Zealand experience has been published in this country.

Never have American professors and teachers of reading acted more irresponsibly in the face of a serious national problem of growing illiteracy. If it were in our power to do so, we'd fire the whole lot of them tomorrow.

What Can Be Done?

Can anything be done to stop the whole language movement and restore sanity to reading instruction in American schools?

Yes, something can be done. In our Open Letter to Pres. Bush (BEL, Nov. 88) we urged the President to have his Secretary of Education authorize a controlled, scientific experiment whereby the three currently used reading instruction methods could be fairly tested for their efficacy. We wrote:

"Designate ten schools to use intensive phonics, ten to use a regular basal reading program, and ten to use whole language. In that way, we shall be able to determine once and for all which method is the most effective."

Send a copy of this Newsletter to the President and his Secretary of Education, Dr. Lauro Cavazos, and urge them to authorize this experiment.

We also urge you to make Xerox copies of this newsletter or purchase copies in bulk and send them to your school boards, principals, teachers, the editorial page editor of your local newspaper, the education editor, your state legislators and Congressmen, the Governor, Barbara Bush, Marilyn Quayle, columnists, talk-show hosts, etc.

Only by exposing this fraud will we have any chance at all of restoring common sense to the classroom.

Vital Addresses

Pres. George Bush
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Mrs. Barbara Bush
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Mrs. Marilyn Quayle
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Hon. Lauro Cavazos
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20202

The Great Debate Heats Up

One would have thought that 34 years after Rudolf Flesch ignited the great debate of phonics vs. look-say, the argument would have been settled by now. Why Johnny Can't Read was published in 1955, and in that book Flesch explained that the reason why Johnny couldn't read was because, in the early 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading is taught. They threw out time-tested alphabetic phonics and put in a new

look-say, sight, or whole-word method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system.

Flesch contended that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on an alphabetic writing system you get reading disability. The book caused quite a furor.

The Educators Reject Flesch

The educators rejected Flesch's arguments and continued using the look-say method. Meanwhile, a great debate raged between the advocates of phonics and the advocates of look-say. And because Flesch was not a member of the education establishment, his book had little influence on classroom teachers.

But in 1967, a book appeared that caused the reading establishment a bit of a problem. The book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, was written by Dr. Jeanne Chall, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After several years of research into a mountain of studies done on beginning reading instruction, Chall came to the conclusion that the phonics, or code, approach produced better readers than the look-say or "meaning" approach. In short, it was a vindication of what Flesch had asserted 12 years earlier. Chall was confident that she had finally settled the debate.

The Establishment Challenges Chall

Most of the reviewers in the education establishment journals were critical of Chall's study, but it did strengthen the position of those who advocated phonics. It gave them some renewed respectability in an otherwise hostile environment. Meanwhile, the profession became polarized between those who agreed with Chall and those who followed the gurus of look-say. From the look-say camp came a steady stream of anti-phonics articles in the professional journals.

Meanwhile, Ken Goodman's English-as-Chinese groupies began developing their whole-language approach. As the movement spread throughout the profession, the proponents of phonics were alerted to its dangers. They were the only people in the profession who might prevent the whole-language movement from getting off the ground.

Zeroing in on Chall

Also, Chall's views were reflected in several important publications of the U.S. Dept. of Education which, under William Bennett, favored a phonics emphasis in beginning reading instruction. Since Chall was the authority behind Bennett's views, her research had to be discredited and phonics had to be buried once and for all.

The attack on Dr. Chall appeared in Phi Delta Kappan of Nov. 1988. Written by Prof. Marie Carbo of Antioch University, it was fittingly titled "Debunking the Great Phonics Myth."

Carbo argued that, due to Chall's influence, phonics was being taught in U.S. schools, and that the results were not good. She wrote:

"If phonics is so effective and so much of it has been taught for the past 20 years, one might reasonably ask why the U.S. ranks 49th in literacy."

What Carbo blithely ignored is that the phony phonics taught in look-say basal programs is not the intensive, systematic phonics that produces good readers. Phonetic clues taught in the context of an ideographic -- or Chinese -- methodology are simply aids to word guessing.

As for Chall's research, Carbo's attack was very detailed and very technical with 88 footnotes covering 4 pages. Few readers would bother to wade through that much quibbling. But it gave the impression that Carbo knew what she was talking about, and that phonics had met its nemesis.

Chall Responds

In March 1989, the Kappan published Chall's response. Entitled "Learning to Read: The Great Debate 20 Years Later -- A Response to 'Debunking the Great Phonics Myth,'" Chall produced the best single defense of phonics written in recent years.

She demolished Carbo's "research" on her research and even chided the Kappan for publishing such an "irresponsible and possibly harmful" article. Chall wrote:

"[W]hen an article is published in the prestigious journal of America's largest professional society in education, one expects that the norms of science and scholarship will be respected."

Chall then refuted each of Carbo's criticisms, point by point.

Here are some interesting points made by Dr. Chall:

"Phonics is often taught incorrectly by teachers who themselves have not learned phonics or who have not received instruction in teaching it in their college classes."

"Currently, the anti-phonics movement has taken unto itself a pro-literature, pro-writing, and pro-thinking stance, as if those who teach phonics and decoding are opposed to these obviously excellent aims. And yet the history of reading instruction teaches us that literature, writing, and thinking are not exclusive properties of any one approach to beginning reading."

"The author of the Kappan article . . . proposes to replace the systematic teaching of phonics with a whole-language approach. Yet we are offered no definition of her preferred approach. One can well understand that it is difficult to define, because its proponents seem to define it in so many different ways."

"Another aspect of beginning reading programs favored by the Kappan author and by other whole-language proponents is that phonics be taught only 'as needed.' . . . To say that teachers should teach phonics only as needed is to put a greater burden of responsibility on teachers and children than theory, research, and practice support. And it puts at even greater risk those children who need the instruction most -- low-income, minority, and learning-disabled children."

Chall KO's Carbo

Dr. Chall concluded her response with the following:

"One must conclude that the efforts of Marie Carbo to 'debunk' the 'great phonics myth' have failed. The many claims she makes regarding the shortcomings of the research on the phonics issue seem to be more characteristic of her own analyses than of those of the researchers she criticizes.

"Many scholarly publications guard against such misrepresentations by employing qualified readers as peer reviewers to critique articles before they are published, particularly in areas of controversy and of social importance. Such cautions are necessary to protect children -- and the educational community that serves them.

"Thus, although Marie Carbo tried to show that the value of teaching phonics is a myth, the research evidence from 1910 to 1988 shows that the real 'myth' is that children can learn to read English text without knowing or learning anything about phonics or letter-sound correspondences. Marie Carbo seems to believe strongly in such a myth. But, of course, she is wrong."

Bravo, Prof. Chall!

California Schools to Teach Evolution

The California Board of Education unanimously adopted a new policy statement intended to strengthen the teaching of evolution in the state's 7,125 public schools.

A key provision of the policy specifies that only theories based on factual evidence should be taught in science classes, while theories based on religious belief "are appropriate to the History-Social Science and English-Language Arts curricula."

Associate State Superintendent Francie Alexander described adoption of the new policy statement as "a very significant step" toward eliminating the hesitancy of some local schools to teach evolution. (Idaho Statesman, 1/14/89)

Comment:

Ms. Alexander is the same curriculum director who informed us last fall that California is adopting whole-language reading instruction programs for its primary schools. Between evolution and whole language there is no telling what kind of damage will be done to the minds and souls of the children of California.

How can anyone have confidence in American public education when the "experts" in charge exhibit such ignorance, arrogance, and evil intent? It is tragic that so many children will have to suffer needlessly before parents finally wake up.

Vital Quotes

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have

forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

April 30, 1863
President Abraham Lincoln's
Proclamation for a National Day
of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer

PURE Convention Place and Dates Changed

The place and dates of the second annual convention of Parents for Unalienable Rights in Education (PURE) have been changed. It will not be held in April at Arlington Heights, Illinois, as previously announced. It will be held in Grand Prairie, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, on Friday, July 14 and Saturday, July 15, 1989, in conjunction with a Home School Book Fair.

Holding the convention simultaneously with a book fair will enable us to draw more attendees from an area where home schooling is growing rapidly.

For information about the convention and book fair, contact Jack Dolph, 702 West Church St., Grand Prairie, Texas 75050. His phone numbers are (home) 214-642-1075 and (office) 214-742-5390.

The convention and book fair will be held on the premises of the Shady Grove Church, 1829 W. Shady Grove, Grand Prairie.